



Trust Your Gut

By Wendy Marks
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In Dr. Michael Gershon's seminal book "The Second Brain" he talks about "the brain below" in which he says, "The enteric nervous system can, when it chooses, process data its sensory receptors pick up all by themselves, and it can act on the basis of those data to activate a set of effectors that it alone controls. The enteric nervous system is thus not a slave of the brain but a contrarian, independent spirit in the nervous organization of the body. It is a rebel, the only element of the peripheral nervous system that can elect not to do the bidding of the brain or spinal cord."

In more prosaic words, if your gut is in trouble so are you. You can't think your way out of it; the gut has a mind of its own. Anyone struggling with problems from GERD to IBS can attest to this fact. There is a whole second set of priorities, needs and demands that our digestive system makes, requiring us to pay attention to it or feel its wrath.

The digestive system does so much more than just process our food. It is arbiter of how much nutrition we receive; it is a greater provider of serotonin than the brain, regulating our moods, and a detoxifier that keeps us from being poisoned by chemicals that we ingest voluntarily or involuntarily. And that's just the beginning.

Many of us grew up with the belief that we could eat whatever we want, whenever we wanted, and the worst result would be the need for an Alka-Seltzer. However, we have learned over the past two decades that in order to have a good state of health we must pay deep attention to our digestive system and its needs and wants.

So what are some basic things that we must do to take care of this very important system? First, eat bulk or roughage. The primary job our digestive system accomplishes is in processing our food, creating energy from the nutrients, and turning the remainder into waste. This is a very complicated process that we can support best by eating sufficient bulk; five servings of vegetables and fruit, and drinking enough water. Stools that are loose or constipation can create great problems ranging from hemorrhoids to dehydration. Long-term issues of the bowel-waste process can create significant problems.

Of course, eating the proper foods is an important factor in keeping the gut healthy. I won't lecture here on the importance of a balanced diet and eating the proper amounts of fats, sugars and carbohydrates, but finding that balance and eating properly allows for good digestion. In many cases, supplements such as green drinks may be helpful when we can't get or nutrition easily from our daily diet.

Stress is the second biggest problem to overcome. If we are stressed, our systems do not work the way they are supposed to. When stress becomes the priority, all else cannot work as well as it's designed to. This is particularly true of the digestive system. So if we can't avoid stress, we can find ways to manage it, and sometimes provide supplements to overcome the negative effects.

Parasites are a problem as well. We used to believe that this was a thing of the past, but issues as varied as Candida overgrowth and fungal bowel problems are much more common in this age of the overuse of antibiotics. We must deal with their aftermath in a balanced way.

Some of us have digestive problems such as reflux, irritable bowel, chronic constipation, a clogged liver, or other digestive distress. The good news is that there are many ways to reverse these difficulties. Your digestive system can be very forgiving. Some of the ways to repair things may be short term dietary restrictions, cleanses, supplements, food rotations, and even abdominal massage.

We are learning over time to be good custodians of our digestive system, and perhaps even to listen to the cues and trust our gut. There are so many tools at our disposal, and so much more knowledge. I am happy to help you with these issues. Let this be a beginning of a Renaissance of the Belly. Please enjoy all the lovely fruits and vegetables of the season. Make the second brain happy. And trust your gut.

Wendy